

Higher education policies in Brazil: 1970–90

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Abstract. Under the authoritarian regime, policies on higher education were mostly produced by the Executive. First of all, an Educational Reform made up for the rapid expansion of a huge private sector where small teaching institutions prevail and which now absorbs over 60% of Brazilian students. The public sector, in turn, was substantially improved: the number of full time faculty increased and teachers in the federal universities were encouraged to apply for a M.A. or a Ph.D. and to get involved with research activities. Meanwhile, a dual funding system (teaching and research) emerged which was responsible both for the creation of graduate programmes all over the country and for the expansion of a research infrastructure. The civilian government (1985 on) brought policy making out of the bureaucracy and into the Congress. The new Constitution granted the university a degree of autonomy it had never enjoyed before which, however, is still to be regulated by further legislation. Policy initiatives driving at institutional differentiation and at performance assessment have systematically failed to become effective due to resistances within the university itself. Meanwhile financial stringency at a time of recession necessarily leads to reductions in funding, notably for research.

The analysis of higher education policies produced in Brazil in the last twenty years shows patterns of policy-making that are closely related to the nature of the political regimes under which they occurred.¹ From 1964 to 1985, Brazil was ruled by military regimes, with different degrees of authoritarianism. Throughout this period, a distinctive feature was the development of autonomous bureaucracies that monopolized most of the decision-making in almost every sector. The Congress was open most of the time, but performed mainly a legitimizing role.

With redemocratization in 1985, rules establishing the functions and prerogatives of both the Legislative and the Executive were redefined under a new Constitution, approved in 1988. In principle, the Executive was replaced by the Legislative as the main decision-making arena, thus enlarging the scope of the policy-making process and bringing in new political actors. Important decisions now require legislative approval, and major issues can only be settled after demand aggregation and negotiation through the political parties. In practice, the Executive tries to hold as much as it can to its decision powers, while the Legislative has had difficulty in improving its ability to produce decisions on major policy issues; hence, relations between the two powers are subject to permanent negotiations of attribution and responsibility, with important effects upon substantive, sectoral policies.

These features of the decision-making process in the authoritarian period and in the new democratic phase have left their imprint on recent higher education policies in Brazil. This paper will stress aspects such as the displacement of the *arena*

where policies were built up under both regimes and the main consequences of this transition; important changes in the scope of the decision-making process; and their effects upon the *nature* of the policies produced.

1. Higher education policies under the authoritarian regime: 1970–85

By the early seventies, Brazilian public administration had already been modernized to a large extent, increasing its ability for policy-making in specialized areas and building efficient tools to carry them out. In this period, higher education policies were discussed and generated within a few agencies located in the Ministry of Education, involving mostly bureaucrats and experts on the subject on the one hand, and the heads of public and private institutions of higher education on the other.

When “closed politics” is the rule, the bureaucracy becomes the main arena where a few actors take part in the decision-making process. A closed political system does not mean the absence of conflicts and differences of interest and perspectives, just that these conflicts take place behind the curtains, and the number of relevant actors is restricted. In the authoritarian years, organized student movements and political parties were excluded; security and intelligence agents were granted, for a while, a free hand in repressing, harassing and expelling from the universities students and professors considered too dangerous and politically subversive. At the same time, competent cadres were co-opted by the more enlightened administrative agencies, and a new strata of technobureaucrats played a variety of roles that ranged from the selection of whom was going to take part in the decisions, to which were the major topics in the agenda, and acted as “brokers” between different sectors and the upper governmental echelons. Bureaucrats were also powerful actors themselves, as they tried to set forth their views on higher education.

a. The expansion of the system: the 1968 reform and the rapid increase of the private sector

Policies in the seventies should be seen in the light of the discredit the higher education institutions suffered in the sixties, and the growing demand for education that increased geometrically in the first years of the decade. The discredit was dramatized by the growing political mobilization of students and intellectuals, that charged the universities with being elitist, out of touch with the country’s needs, and unable to create space and conditions for research; and confirmed by conservative sectors, which saw in the universities a breeding ground for radicals and misfits. In the late sixties a comprehensive university reform was passed, replacing the traditional chair system with academic departments, setting the grounds for graduate education and research, and establishing the noble principle that, in Brazilian higher education institutions, research, teaching and extension

work should go together. At this time, a large part of the Brazilian higher education institutions were not universities proper, but teaching institutions granting degrees in one or a few fields. The 1968 reform assumed that, in time, these institutions would converge into the full university model.

What the Reform did not predict was the extraordinary increase in the demand for higher education in the following years, which was absorbed mostly by a private sector that grew in a way that was opposite to what the reformers had sought. In 1968 there were 272,295 students enrolled in 1,712 degree granting programs, 55% of the programs and students in public institutions; in 1972 there were 688,382 students in 3,124 programs, 53% of the programs and 60% of the students in the private sector. Although from 1973 onwards the system grew at a slower pace, growth rates were still significant until 1978.

Policies in the ensuing years followed two contradictory paths. In the best part of the public system, professors were stimulated to work for higher degrees, graduate programs were set in place, fellowships were granted for studies in the country and abroad, and research money started to flow to the best research institutes and departments. Full-time employment, which did not exist before the 1968 reform, became the rule in most public universities, regardless of their ability to do research and the quality of their programs. At the same time, government requirements for the creation of new private institutions were loosened, and they proliferated.

b. The dual funding system: the beginnings of university research

Until the sixties, most of the existing scientific research in Brazil had been developed in specialized institutions *outside* the university. The Ministry of Education, which was responsible for the funding of public higher education, had traditionally designated negligible sums for the setting up of research groups in the federal universities. The only consistent effort in that direction dated back to the early fifties, when CAPES, an agency that granted scholarships for graduate studies in Brazil and abroad, was created. The Ministry of Education was created in the early thirties, in a period of political centralization, and developed throughout the years into a huge, internally fragmented, inefficient bureaucracy where appointments for the key positions and the allocation of financial resources were mostly based on political and electoral interests. In a context where patronage prevailed, investment in research – which had scarcely any visibility – had necessarily little political appeal, and was not really in the agenda of the higher education institutions, shaped along the Napoleonic model of professional “faculties.”

In the early seventies, however, a dual funding system emerged that provided for an increasing, steady flow of funds for research activities into the reformed universities. The dual funding system relied on distinct functions played by two different Ministries: wages were paid by the Ministry of Education as part of the university budget allocated to the teaching staff, while equipment costs, scholarships for students and supplements to the researchers’ salaries were funded

by the Ministry of Planning, with resources from the National Fund for Scientific and Technological Development (FNDCT).

This was a budgetary fund under the authority of the Ministry of Planning, an agency that, in the sixties and seventies, brought under its wing Brazil's main investment Bank, the National Bank of Economic Development (BNDE), the country's main economics research outfit, the Institute of Research and Applied Economics (IPEA), the National Census Bureau (IBGE) and the National Research Council, among other units. In contrast with the Ministry of Education, most of the agencies within the new ministry were flexible, well staffed, and relied on specialized, professional expertise to allocate research funds according to *technical* rather than political criteria.

During most of the seventies, the dual funding system worked under exceptionally favourable conditions. FNDCT expanded quickly and was managed by the Financing Agency for Studies and Projects, FINEP, a light, flexible administration that allowed for the allocation of funds to the best research groups, free from political and bureaucratic constraints. In less than ten years, a significant research capability was created both *within* and *outside* the university, through the establishment of new research groups and the reinforcement and consolidation of the previously existing ones. The principle of "investing in the best" proved especially fruitful in expanding research capacity in areas such as physics, engineering, agriculture, economics, biological and the social sciences. It ultimately led to a strong concentration of funds in a few institutions consuming around 70% of the total resources, paralleled by an increasing fragmentation of the remaining 30% among a growing number of institutions and research groups.

While the FNDCT kept on growing – as it did in the early seventies – or at least stabilized at a relatively high level – as happened in the late seventies – this strategy of resource allocation produced, on the whole, very positive results. The institutions that obtained most of the funds were consolidated as "centres of excellence" in their specific areas and soon acted as "incubators" from where new research and graduate programmes irradiated to other regions of the country; fragmented financial support dispensed to most of the remaining institutions apparently satisfied their needs and proved sufficient to start and maintain their research activities. Until 1977 the supply of funds generally exceeded the demand for research grants by nearly 15% per year. Besides the FNDCT – that provided support at the institutional level – the National Research Council awarded individual scholarships to research staff in institutions and university departments and to students registered in graduate programmes (here overlapping with similar activities carried on by CAPES).

c. Improving public higher education

Once the expansion of higher education had been launched and a large private sector emerged, the policies carried out by the Ministry of Education differed significantly according to the sector on which they focused.

Policies for the public sector consisted of a race between a rapidly expanding body of full-time teachers into the universities and the efforts to increase their qualifications through graduate education. Public higher education did not expand as quickly as in the private sphere, but each state and most large cities demanded to have their own federal university, each staffed with the administrative and academic personnel they had at hand. A previously non-existing social group, the academic profession, emerged in a few years, and became a strong pressure group demanding higher salaries, employment privileges and full civil-service benefits. These benefits required, in turn, a substantial growth in the budget of the federal universities, 80% of which were spent in salaries.

While public higher education grew and academic research rapidly diffused within the best universities, an important redefinition in the scope and spheres of decision-making occurred: the Ministry of Education lost control over the higher education budget to the Ministry of Planning, which became the main arena where the allocation of funds to the federal universities was negotiated. The Ministry of Planning thus controlled both the budget for the federal universities and research, while the Ministry of Education had its scope of decision confined to the certification of new institutions and to substantive, specific policies of higher education.

From the end of 1976 onwards the Brazilian government faced increasing difficulties to finance its own activities. Public investment declined significantly and huge projects were slowed or interrupted. In a situation where resource scarcity prevailed, hardly any sector was spared from the strict budgetary policy carried out by the Ministry of Planning. Discretionary funds, like those assigned to research, were severely affected, whereas the permanent budget of the federal universities, salaries above all, though experiencing some losses were, in general, preserved.

The effects of this rigid policy on the university budgets were softened by the rising political power the teachers' associations gained in the early eighties, which coincided with the gradual transfer of power from the military to the civilian elites. A major issue was the establishment of equal salaries for the teachers occupying the same positions in the federal universities all over the country, irrespective of location and academic productivity. Strikes by university teachers became a frequent instrument of pressure for higher salaries. When salaries could not be raised, the government compensated by job security and softening the criteria for promotion along the academic ranks. The result was that, in spite of the increasing restriction of governmental funds for higher education, total expenditures on the teaching faculty in the federal universities rose slowly, but steadily, until 1982.

Decline in research funds, on the contrary, appeared as an almost irreversible trend. By 1984 – when FNDCT was reduced to less than a third of its total amount in 1975 – the negative effects of this long-lasting situation could already be felt. The obsolescence of most of the existing research equipment and the inability to retain research assistants and administrative staff on “soft” money hindered further progress both in basic science and in the technological areas such as physics, biology and engineering, and several consolidated research groups broke down all

over the country. A whole decade of steady investment – which had evolved along reasonably consistent policy lines – was seriously threatened.

Successive cuts in the research funds in the late seventies and early eighties coincided with a period in which the funding agencies had largely expanded their range of action. During the “years of affluence,” close links had developed between their technical cadres and the research groups and institutions that had become permanent “clients” of FNDCT, and spoke out in their defense when their budgets were threatened. Faced with a highly fragmented demand from a vast array of institutions, the funding agencies chose to allocate small sums to most of them, rather than to determine priority areas in which to invest and leave many research groups unsupported.

The financing strategy adopted – which could be labelled as “the distribution of misery” – somehow assured the survival of research groups, but hardly allowed for any scientific progress at all. The sharp decline in research funds combined with an increasingly fragmented pattern of allocation adopted by the agencies led to an inflexibility which resulted in the virtual lack of any policy by the research funding agencies until 1985.

d. The private sector: from de-regulation to restrictive accreditation policies

Most of the private institutions of higher education founded in the great wave of expansion – from 1968 to 1972 – were self-sustained and received no regular government support. In principle, an accreditation from the Ministry of Education is needed to establish a university-level institution in Brazil, a task under the responsibility of the Federal Council of Education, which works as a normative and regulatory body in matters of education for the Ministry of Education. In the years of expansion, procedures for accreditation of new institutions of higher education obeyed two distinct patterns: a liberal, de-regulated strategy that prevailed until 1976, and some attempts at more restrictive policies, which occurred irregularly between 1976 and 1984.

Between 1968 and 1972 the Federal Council of Education based most of its decisions on accreditation on very loose criteria regarding the qualification of the teaching faculty, facilities, time devoted to teaching and supervising activities and the curricular structure of new course programs. The aim was to hasten expansion to allow for the rapid absorption of the rising demand for higher education, which largely exceeded the existing supply of vacancies. As one of the main promoters of the expansion policy, the Federal Council of Education “facilitated” rather than regulated the creation of private institutions. Meanwhile, access to the public institutions was controlled by a complex and, sometimes, highly competitive system of entrance examinations, which excluded in practice those who could not afford a good (meaning private) secondary school.

By the mid-seventies, most of the private higher education institutions consisted of small “faculties,” or schools, offering no more than two or three undergraduate programs, low quality education and scarcely any facilities such as libraries or

laboratories. Most of these institutions centred their activities on evening courses in the area of human and social sciences and operated at a very low cost. Their usual clientele were youngsters and adults from lower middle-class backgrounds, looking for upward mobility through a professional career or for upgrading in their present jobs.

This policy was seen with increasing concern by representatives of the liberal professions and some sectors in the Ministry of Education itself – mostly connected with the Department of Higher Education – and this started a reaction against what they called the “indulgent” accreditation policy carried out by the Federal Council of Education. A series of restrictive accreditation policies were enforced after 1975. At first, there was an attempt to limit accreditation to courses in specific, “priority” areas, which were never defined; and was followed, two years later, by the total suspension of accreditations while new, more selective criteria were under discussion. Accreditations were resumed one year later, under much closer scrutiny by the Ministry of Education. Between 1978 and 1980 only 10% of the applications for new institutions were granted. The process was again paralysed from 1981 to 1983 and submitted to major alterations: the Federal Council of Education lost its power as the sole accreditation agency, and had to share it with other agencies of the Ministry of Education and – in special cases such as in Medicine, Law and Engineering – with professional associations committed to the improvement of undergraduate courses and limitation of expansion in those areas.

Summarizing, under the authoritarian regime, policy-making in higher education was circumscribed to bureaucratic arenas, which usually coincided with the specialized agencies responsible for policy implementation. This trend was very clear in matters of funding. In the late seventies, as the financial restrictions increased, negotiations regarding budgetary allocation gradually moved from the Ministry of Education to the Ministry of Planning, where all non-economic areas were placed in a situation of disadvantage. Agencies specialized in research funding, in turn, were born within the formal jurisdiction of the Ministry of Planning, where policies for the scientific and technological areas were also sorted out. The informal division of tasks that operated in the authoritarian period also differentiated clearly between the distinct capabilities for policy-making that the two Ministries displayed. The Ministry of Planning appeared as the modern, rational and more competent branch of the government bureaucracy, handling a comprehensive development project for the country and producing reasonably consistent sectoral policies. The Ministry of Education, on the other hand, was heavily influenced by political patronage, and gradually lost the initiative in the policy-making process. Accreditation, however, remained as an attribute of the Ministry of Education. This area unquestionably belonged to this jurisdiction and, besides, was not under political dispute by any other ministry. Disputes over accreditation were mainly internal and involved agencies *within* the Ministry of Education, and responded to the demands and pressures of private educational entrepreneurs and the liberal professional associations, many of them represented in the Federal Council of Education.

2. Redemocratization and higher education policies: the focus on evaluation procedures and institutional differentiation

The civilian government established in 1985 found the public higher education system in a precarious situation: the economic crisis – followed by recession – had led to a substantial decline in the resources both for the federal universities and for research, and the university budgets were almost totally spent on salaries for the teaching and administrative staffs. In addition, retraction of the job market brought a significant fall in the demand for vacancies in the private institutions of higher education.

The end of the authoritarian regime also coincided with intensive political mobilization through which organized sectors of society pressed for a wider share in the decision-making process. In this period, political parties and pressure groups centred their action around specific issues and demands that, in time, defined the agenda for discussion and elaboration of the new Constitution.

a. Shifting the policy-making arena to Congress

The Constitution approved in 1987 led to important changes in policy-making. The main policy initiatives and much of the decision-making shifted from the Executive to the Legislative. Agencies within the Ministry of Education, which had generated most of the higher education policies in the previous period, lost much of their initiative. The scope of decision-making was enlarged: new political actors were incorporated, and, because of the fragmentation of Brazilian political parties, individual politicians, rather than their parties, became the focus of pressures and the spokesmen of organized groups.

One consequence of this shift was the intense politicization of the issues discussed and put forward in the Congressional debates and enactments. Issues like the maintenance of the single university model established in the 1968 reform, restrictions of federal funding to private institutions, free tuition in public institutions, homogeneous career patterns and salary levels in all federal institutions, political autonomy to elect the university rectors and other authorities, the civil servant status and implied immovability of professors after a few years in the job, all these issues, while expressing the interests of specific groups, were presented as ingredients of an ideologically consistent model of university organization – public, science oriented, free, democratic, participatory – and enshrined in the Constitution. At the same time, the legislators recovered their power to influence budget allocations in favour of their regional and institutional constituencies, whether in the elaboration of the annual budget or through direct influence in the decisions taken by the Ministry of Education.

For the Executive, from 1985 to 1991, the Ministry of Education became a political bargaining chip and given to politicians of the Partido da Frente Liberal, a conservative group that draws most of its strength from the local elites in small, and specially the poor, Northeastern states. The succession of “liberal” politicians that

controlled the Ministry of Education had to perform an extremely difficult juggling feat: to maintain the traditional, pork-barrel practices of resource allocation; not to confront the organized, ideologically minded interest groups with their strong presence in the Congress, the press and on the campuses; to deal with the economic authorities in their attempts to reduce the costs and obvious wastage of the whole system; and, time and energy permitting, to try to look for ways of making the higher education system more modern, less wasteful and more relevant for society.

b. Structuring the debate: The National Commission and the Executive Group for Higher Education

The belief that a common ground could be found to unify these diversified interests and perspectives under-pinned the creation of the National Commission for the Restructuring of Higher Education in 1985. Its members – personally appointed by the President of the Republic – were well-known professionals of several areas and specialists on higher education. Its composition expressed concern with the development of distinct trends in civil society. The Commission's report focused primarily on the academic, administrative and financial autonomy of public universities and the need for systematic assessment of quality as an instrument for resource allocation. Diversification of higher education also deserved special emphasis. Different types of institutions should provide adequate professional training in the areas where they could best accomplish their particular vocation. Universities, however, were expected to perform a much broader role, ranging from professional training to essentially academic education. Mobility within the system should be assured, allowing for students to move between different types of institutions.

These proposals were strongly opposed by the teachers' unions and most sectors in the less qualified institutions, and did not get more than token support from the government itself. In this period, Ministers of Education rarely stayed in post for more than a year, and none of them had a protracted conflict with organized university groups in their list of priorities. The main product of the Commission was the establishment of a task force within the Ministry of Education – the Executive Group for Higher Education, GERES – which was formally assigned the task of laying out the main policy lines for the restructuring of the federal higher education system.

The idea, inherent in the Group's appointment, was to create a technically competent group within the Ministry. This was perceived as an attempt to reestablish the decision-making pattern prevailing in the authoritarian period, and gave rise to much criticism among the sectors linked to the university. It was feared that the Group would rely on its "privileged" bureaucratic insertion to ensure the enforcement of the policies it recommended, therefore avoiding the pattern of public exposure that doomed the recommendations put forward by the Commission.

At the end, the Group's proposals drew strong opposition from two very

influential sectors in the higher education area. As expected, the teachers' and employees' unions felt threatened again with the institutionalization of evaluation procedures that could lead to unequal wages, career patterns and benefits according to qualification and academic productivity. Simultaneously, the academic community – an ally that always could be counted upon as far as the quality assessment of institutions was concerned – strongly opposed the proposals for institutional differentiation, perceived as a downgrading of the universities through the dissociation between teaching and research. Given its higher costs and scarcity of funds, the Group suggested that investment in research should concentrate on those universities where research activities had better chances to succeed and develop. The remaining ones should function as “teaching universities,” specializing in professional training.

In face of these criticisms, the government refrained from turning the Executive Group's recommendations into a bill to be voted on by the Congress, as it was originally intended, thus reinforcing the tendency for virtual “non-policy” making in higher education, typical of the years immediately following the end of the authoritarian regime.

Although the recommendations from the National Commission and the Executive Group for Higher Education were not implemented, they were extremely useful for expanding the debate on higher education and setting the main issues around which effective policy-making should proceed after that. The issue of quality assessment of institutions succeeded in displacing from the foreground the traditional cleavage between public or private education that, for about fifty years, had been the central issue of the debate on higher education in Brazil. After some time, the need to establish a nationwide system of institutional and academic evaluation was accepted in principle by all sectors. Fuelled by the Ministry of Education, which renounced in practice any attempt at implementation, the discussion moved on to matters of procedure, where old cleavages reappeared in new disguise. The debate was now on matters of evaluation procedures, with the unions and less qualified institutions favouring self-evaluation and “qualitative” procedures, and academic sectors standing for external evaluation, peer review and measurable indicators; and on the agency or institution responsible for carrying out evaluation.

c. The general regulation of higher education

While this discussion on evaluation procedures dragged on, the Congressional debate on a comprehensive education law continued, through a special committee in the Legislative specifically designed to work as its formal decision-making arena.

Suggestions and proposals stemming from different sectors of the higher education area were presented in this Committee by representatives of different teachers' associations and academic societies. The main cleavage settled around the proposals fostered by the unions, on the one hand, and by the academic community

on the other. The unions favoured an all-pervasive, detailed regulation, with norms and rules carefully stating the sources and minimal amount of budgetary resources to be channelled to public universities. Part of the discussion evolved around the establishment of a collegiate council planned to replace the current Federal Council of Education in matters of higher education. The pressure from the unions was towards organizing this council along strict corporatist lines, with representatives of the wide range of teachers' associations and academic societies. Besides, the new legislation was supposed to consolidate items that were already incorporated in the Constitution and in the daily practice of the Ministry of Education: similar career patterns and salaries for teachers in all the federal universities – the so-called “isonomy,” – rigid career patterns limiting differentiation according to academic merit and productivity, and political – but not financial and decisional – autonomy for the universities.

Opposition to these ideas came from individual representatives of the academic community and from some sectors in the bureaucracy, that never organized themselves as a concerted pressure group. They opposed wage isonomy and the system's rigidity. Most of their demands centred around the improvement of the quality of the higher education system. Differentiation both at the institutional and at the career levels were also central to their proposals. Institutional differentiation was expected to make the system more democratic, in so far it opened a variety of “entrances” and “exits” to institutions offering distinct types and levels of professional training. In addition, it would assure intra-system mobility, meaning that students would be allowed to move between institutions and choose among alternatives leading either to more demanding training or to short-term, vocational careers providing an earlier access to the job market. Career differentiation – based on wage differences and other kinds of rewards set by each individual university – was considered essential to stimulate increasing academic qualification and productivity. The right to hire and dismiss members of the teaching and administrative staff was another demand that stemmed directly from the autonomy of the universities. Yet, it collided with the stability in employment that prevails in the Brazilian civil service. Finally, mechanisms of evaluation should follow the lines of the peer review system instead of becoming a “bureaucratic task” to be assigned to a specific government agency.

Without political parties effectively working as instruments for demand aggregation and reconciliation, the writing of the law project for the regulation of higher education had to be built up through a slow, complex process of adjustment of individual demands. The Chairman of the Committee played a crucial role in the negotiation with different interest-groups. The effort to include the main demands of each and to “stitch them up” in the same text, to guarantee its approval both by the Committee and by the Congress, led to some unanticipated effects. The incorporation of disperse, fragmented and often antagonistic, demands made the law project appear internally inconsistent and disconnected, making its implementation hardly feasible; and the corporatist pattern of interest-representation and adjustment resulted in an extensive, detailed regulation of the participation of the distinct sectors and groups involved with higher education. In

the proposal, the power of those groups is “crystallized,” leaving almost no room for changes in the structure of representation of the agencies and collegiate bodies, and leading to total annihilation of the decision making authority of the executive branch. The final proposal, which deals with education at all levels, has been before Congress for nearly a year now. In early 1992, it has received more than 2,000 amendments, making it a nightmare of fragmentation and internal incongruence – and its approval by the Congress still more difficult.

3. Conclusions: policy making in times of scarcity

The conflicts, shifts in decision arenas and decisional paralysis described above suggest a basic lack of consensus in the understanding of the nature, goals and possibilities of higher education institutions in a society. They also reflect a disagreement about the resources available to the State for distribution among political patrons, worthy undertakings and ambitious projects. From the Second World War until the late seventies, except for a few years, Brazil enjoyed one of the highest economic growth rates in the world, combined with equally extreme levels of social and economic inequality. The state bureaucracy also grew, and disputes in the policy arena, in this period, evolved mostly around the questions of whom should have the control and the benefits of public money. In the eighties, however, the economy stagnated, public deficit ran out of control and inflation took over, leading to a painful period of readjustment that is far from being concluded. Some sectors still see the current predicaments as a short term crisis, due to wrong economic policy decisions in the past, or to the machinations of powerful, private (and often multinational) groups in the present. For others, the state is the culprit, and nothing less than its dismantling could make the economy run again. As the harsh facts of the economy settle in, interest-group activism, blunt ideologies and pork-barrel politicking lose their effectiveness, and a gradual perception of the new realities emerge. The state will not disappear, and will maintain its presence in higher education. But the universities will have to justify their share against the demands of public health, basic education, housing, environment protection, urban transportation and others, which are bound to get stronger as the problems of economic competitiveness, social inequality and urban decay come to the fore of the country's social and political agenda.

This is the context in which a major shift in education policy happened in Brazil, with the designation of a scientist, and former rector of Brazil's main university, as the Minister of Education. This nomination may signal the transference of education from the sectors in government that are still routinely used for political appointments and bargaining – like transportation, or social welfare – to those that are supposed to be technical and more protected against petty patronage, and are expected to yield results – like the finance and, more recently, health. With this designation, the Ministry of Education could gain legitimacy in its dealings with the academic community, and the quality of the state bureaucracy start to improve. At the same time, the interminable discussions on the new education bill seem to

have come to a standstill and no organized group is really pressing for its approval, with the realization that it will achieve very little.

In this situation, the space for policy initiative seems to have returned to the Executive branch. More rational mechanisms of resource allocation to public institutions are being devised, evaluation mechanisms are being established, constitutional amendments and new legislation to allow for administrative and financial autonomy for the universities are being drafted for consideration by the Congress. The conditions of economic depression that led to this shift in the policy arena are an obstacle, however, to their implementation. The government has other, more important bills to get through the Congress; money was never so scarce, research support from the federal agencies has disappeared, and salaries lose their value in a couple of months with high inflation, leading to demoralizing and repetitive strikes of teachers and employees; and, as the government rapidly depletes its capital of good will, its demoralization spills over all sectors, even those with better intentions, of the public administration. The question is whether, when and if the crisis is over, higher education will return to the old pattern of political stalemate, the lesson will have been learned.

Note

1. This article deals only with the policies of the Brazilian federal government, which, in 1990, was responsible for a network of 36 federal universities and 19 non-university institutions, and regulates the private institutions (40 universities and 656 non-university institutions). It does not deal with state institutions (73, 16 of which universities), which include the large and research-intensive Universidade de São Paulo, Universidade de Campinas and the Universidade do Estado de São Paulo.

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